CHAPTER-2
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The most conspicuous feature of the term 'empowerment' is that it contains the word 'power.' To sidestep philosophical debate, it may be broadly defined as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. The process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed as empowerment.1 Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance.2

While defining empowerment, Nelly Stromquist has said that it is "... a process to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society."3 Similarly Lucy Lazo has defined it (women empowerment) as "... a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources."4 Thus, empowerment means 'giving power to' or 'creating power within.' It is a process that people undergo, which eventually leads to changes. It refers to passing on authority and responsibility. It occurs when someone who did

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4 Ibid.
not have power earlier is given power and this power makes the person who is empowered to experience a sense of ownership and control.\textsuperscript{5}

Having defined empowerment, we can now attempt to define women empowerment. Several scholars have tried to define it and the definitions forwarded by some of them are reproduced here. According to Palanithurai, "Empowering women is a loaded concept which connotes different meanings to different individuals... empowerment of women refers to the process by which women are acquiring due recognition as men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity."\textsuperscript{6} Srilatha Balliwala has been of the view that the term women's empowerment has come to be associated with "women's struggle for social justice and equality."\textsuperscript{7} According to Kiran Devendra, "Empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in developmental activities and in the process of decision-making."\textsuperscript{8} Keller and Mbewe defined women empowerment as the "... process whereby women become able to organise themselves increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choice and to control resources

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5}Mishra, Sweta, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Local Bodies: An Assessment" in Nagarlok (Special Issue on Empowerment of Women and Good Urban Governance), Vol. XXXIV, No. 4, October-December 2002, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid.}
which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination."9 Promila Kapur views women empowerment as a "... process in which greater share of control over resources material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain power."10

According to the country report of Government of India presented at Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, women empowerment means "... working from a portion of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women's inherent strength and positive self-image."11 Empowerment is also defined as the ability to direct and control one's own life. It is a process of enhancing human capabilities to expand choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life of respect and value. It lends moral legitimacy and the principle of social justice to the objectives of human development. It means that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in the economic, political and social decision-making processes."12

On the basis of above definitions, we can conclude that women empowerment is a process in which women gain control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society viz., international, national, local and household. It is nothing but a religious, cultural and legal

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11 Ibid.
struggle against oppression, injustice and discrimination. In other words, it is the
ability to organise and mobilize for change and enable the individual group to
direct their own life and reach a stage where they are more likely to succeed in
whatever they attempt to do. It is an ongoing process and not an end by itself.
According to Surat Singh, it can be viewed as a continuum of several
interrelated and mutually reinforcing components:

- Awareness building about women’s situation, discrimination, and rights
  and opportunities as a step towards gender equality. Collective awareness
  building provides a sense of group identity and power of working as a
group.
- Capacity building and skills development, especially the ability to make
decisions, organise, manage and carry out activities, to deal with people
  and institutions in the world around them.
- Participation and greater control and decision-making power in the home,
  community and society.
- Action to bring about greater equality between men and women.

In short, women empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building
leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and
to transformative action.

2.1 Women Empowerment: International Perspective

Relative backwardness of women (comparison to the menfolk) is almost a global
phenomenon. The women have not been regarded as equal but are showered only

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13 Singh, Surat, “Approaches and Strategies for Woman Empowerment” in Mishra, S.N. et. al.
a secondary status, be it any part of the world. For centuries women had been denied their rights because of prevailing social and cultural backwardness. They were also denied the rights in the decision-making process of their family affairs on account of several social and cultural constraints imposed by their family and the continuation of traditional system of the society. Besides, many restrictions were imposed on their participation in certain social and cultural programmes and even moving outside the households for certain purposes. They were not at all treated at par with the men folk. They were merely considered to be suitable to perform the household chores while remaining behind the four walls of the house.

Needless to mention, however, for a democratic country it is necessary to integrate all sections of the society in the process of decision making and this calls for giving equal rights to the women. This is because unless the views of all the sections of the society are taken into consideration while making a decision, the decision is less likely to be fair. Highlighting the need and importance of integrating the women in the decision making process, Newland presented a strong case in this regard in 1975. According to him:

"When women achieve an equal share of political power, many things besides politics will have changes profoundly. Some further breaking-down of the barriers that constrain the development of individual talents and restrict the range of human resources available to meet society's needs

(eds.). op. cit., ppp. 789-790.
will have taken place. In this respect, women’s increasing political participation is both a source and a signal of social change. As a global trend, rising numbers of women in politics will indicate that human beings are making progress towards a more human world – not because women are necessarily more humane than men, but because any society that categorically excludes half of its members from the processes by which it rules itself will be ruled in a way that is less than fully human."14

The Greek philosopher Plato asserted in the Republic that there should be complete equality between the sexes. The civilizations of China, India and Rome and of Western Europe projected small groups of highly cultivated women. However, real efforts towards improving the lot of the women were started only towards the end of 18th century. From the middle of the 19th century, there has been significant progress towards equality in the areas of education, suffrage, property rights, equality in industry and the right to enter the professions and public life. In general, industrialization accelerated the growth of two social movements – one for democracy and equality and the other for socialism and natural justice. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, waves of these ideologies reverberated in society.15

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In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” arguing that it is not charity that is wanting in world, rather it is justice. The book traces the women’s struggle for rights in different countries. The struggle entered a new phase in the 1800s. England had to reform laws governing marriage. France had to recognise women’s rights to divorce. China had to allow women to hold office. In the first decade of the 20th century women’s movements gathered strength in several countries, including China, Iran, Japan, Korea etc. In the first four decades women got the right to vote in countries ranging from Austria, Germany to Turkey and Uruguay. Around the same time Margaret Sanger in the US, Allen Key in Sweden and Shizue Ishimoto in Japan launched campaign for reproductive rights for women. In this regard, however, it should be kept in mind that any attempt for empowerment would have to embrace at least the following three principles:

(a) Equality of rights between women and men must be enshrined as a fundamental principle. Legal, economic, political or cultural barriers that prevent the exercise of equal rights should be identified and removed through comprehensive policy reforms and strong affirmative action.

(b) Women must be regarded as agents and beneficiaries of change. Investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is

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17 Ibid, pp. 5-6.
not only valuable in itself but is also surest way to contribute to economic
growth and overall development.

(c) The engendered development model, though aiming to widen choices for
both women and men, should not predetermine how different cultures and
different societies exercise these choices. What is important is that equal
opportunities to make a choice exist for both women and men.

But in almost all societies the gender division of labour hands the responsibility
for caring labour to women, much of it without remuneration in the family or as
voluntary activity in the community. The Human Development Report 1995
estimated that women spending two-thirds of their working hours on unpaid work
(men spend just a fourth), and most of those hours are for caring work. The hours
are long and the work physically hard – fetching water and fuel, for example –
especially in rural areas in developing countries. In Nepal women work 21 more
hours each week than men, and in India, 12 hours. In Kenya 8 to 14 year old girls
spend 5 hours more on household chores than boys. These inequalities in burden
are an important part of the obstacles women face in their life choices and
opportunities.¹⁸

To understand the status of women in the society, an examination of their
political status is necessary. Though the political status is interlinked with the
socio-economic status, it has the capacity to influence the transformation of the

socio-economic system. It has now been accepted that women's right to vote and occupy positions is fundamental to a women's status.19

Earlier, women were not allowed to participate in the political process of the country. Later, demand for political equality of women started in 18th century. In Western Europe and North America, where the idea of equality of the sexes first took root, a change in status preceded legislation and with the important exception of suffrage, was often not dependent on law.20

New Zealand was the first country to enfranchise women in 1893 while Australia and Canada did this in 1908. In Britain, attempts to enfranchise women before World War I were unsuccessful, but during the War, women did such responsible work in such a variety of fields that by 1928, all women over 21 were enfranchised. In many countries like USA and France women had to wage relentless struggles for equal political rights. In USA, women's suffrage was secured in 1920 and in 1944 in France.21 In Western Europe, after the World War II, many countries enacted legislation enfranchising women. These included Greece, Italy and France. In Germany, women were enfranchised by the Weimer Constitution of 1919 while the women got the right to franchise in Norway in 1913, in Denmark in 1915 and in Switzerland in 1971.22

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In Soviet Union, it was stipulated in the 1936 Constitution that no legislation or agreement should deviate from the principle of women’s equality with men. It was the same position with countries like Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary. In the Middle East, in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, women have no voting rights. Other Arab States granted either limited or total suffrage to women by the late 1960s. All the states of Latin America have universal suffrage. In Africa, women acquired the suffrage by the 1960, in Liberia in 1947, in Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria in 1960, in Uganda in 1958 and in Botswana and Lesotho in 1966. South Africa was ruled by the white and practised the policy of apartheid thereby denying the franchise rights to the black – both men and women. The women, along with the men, in that country got the right to vote as late as in April 1994.23

Historically, the English Common Law had low regard for the women and the Commonwealth countries followed the same policy thus tending to include discriminatory provisions. Therefore, women in all the Commonwealth countries suffer from the same legal constraints based on the same laws. These countries through meetings of heads of governments, ministers and specialists agree on common ideals. The Singapore Declaration of 1971 committed all Commonwealth Governments to work for equal rights for all citizens and this means equality for women. Since 1980, a special cell – the Women and

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23 Vidya. K.C. Political Empowerment of Women at the Grassroots, Kanishka Publishers and
Development Division - has been established within the Commonwealth Secretariat to serve the cause of the women development. This unit has done much to sensitize the other specialist divisions to the important issues affecting women which underlie so many aspects of development policy.\textsuperscript{24}

When the United Nations was founded in 1945 only about half of the 51 members had extended franchise to women and it (the UN) at first concentrated on political rights which were regarded as the most fundamental. The UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1952, provides that "women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination."\textsuperscript{25}

The United Nations declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and 1980 as the Year for Development of Women. The decade of 1975-85 was hailed as United Nations Women's Development Decade. During this period the nations of the world were expected to focus their attention and resources on the problems of women with the objective of integrating women with the social, economic and political activity.\textsuperscript{26}

But despite all these efforts, even today the position of women even in the developed, let alone the developing countries, is not satisfactory. This would become evident from some of the figures, which are quoted from the UN report...
published to mark the International Women’s Day. United Nations figures show that 70 percent of the world’s 1.2 billion people who are estimated to live in poverty are women and children. A woman dies every minute from complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth, and HIV rates are now rising faster among women than men. The report further says that full-time female workers in Japan earn just 51 percent of the wages of their male counterparts while only one in five managers in Italy is a woman and just 14 percent of the seats in the US Congress are taken by women.  

Again, the report says that only 1 percent of the titled land in the world is owned by women; 62 percent of unpaid family workers are female; 9 percent of judges, 10 percent of company directors and 10 percent of top police officers in the UK are women; 85 million girls worldwide are unable to attend school compared with 45 million boys; in Chad, just 4 percent of the girls go to school; 67 percent of all illiterate adults are women; 1 in 7 women in Ethiopia die in pregnancy or childbirth; in the US, 35 percent of lawyers are women but just 5 percent are partners in law firms; in the European Union, women comprise only 3 percent of the chief executives of major companies. These are only some of the

26 Ibid, p. 5.
excerpts of the report, which, in itself, represents only a part of the stark reality that prevails at the ground.\textsuperscript{28}

The report views that unless urgent action is taken on the status of women, the Millennium Development Goals on reducing poverty, infant deaths and standards of education will not be met. As a measure to ameliorate the plight of the women, the report suggests that there should be adequate representation of the women in all policy making bodies and to this end, at least 30 percent of the parliamentary seats should be represented by the women in all countries.\textsuperscript{29}

2.2 Women Empowerment: Indian Perspective

As delineated above, the position of women in India was no better than in other countries. Therefore, starting with the renaissance period in Indian history, there have been several efforts towards ameliorating the sorry plight of the women in the country. For a better understanding of the subject matter, these efforts have been classified into two parts: Early Efforts and Efforts in the Post-Independence Era.

2.2.1 Early Efforts

The untold miseries and sufferings of women of the nineteenth century awakened the conscience of mankind. Many socio-political reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries criticized the vulnerable position of the women in the society, championed the cause of emancipation of the women and sought to rectify the imbalance in the social power structure. Besides, several organizational efforts to

improve the plight of the women were also carried out by the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthna Samaj and the like. As a result of these efforts, the Imperial (British) Government also took certain steps to stop the profusely prevalent gender discrimination and the crime against women. Thus, for instance, Lord William Bentick issued the famous Regulation XVII on 4th December 1829 whereby the practice of sati was banished. On the efforts of Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. By an Act of 1870, the registration of the birth of a child with the Municipalities was made mandatory. This was done in an effort to eliminate the possibilities of female genocide. Further, the minimum age for marrying a girl was fixed for 12 years by the Infant Marriage Prevention Act of 1891 and was further raised to 14 years by the Sarda Child Marriage Act of 1930. As a result of these initiatives, women were not only coming out of their purdah and receiving education, but started taking active interest in social and political matters and started claiming their rights as citizens.

Gandhi's arrival provided further impetus to women's cause. He opposed child marriage and deplored the treatment meted out to Hindu widows. He propagated the idea of widow remarriage and condemned the purdah system as well as the system of dowry. He wanted the women to be brought on equal footing with men and considered the prevailing evil social practices and the illiteracy of the women as the greatest hindrances in this process. The growth of national movement also helped the women come out of the four walls of the

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30 Ibid. p. 819.
31 Ibid. p. 940.
house and they were emboldened when they faced the lathis and bullets. This had numerous impacts. “First, it was for the first time that women in good number came out of their homes to involve themselves in the national cause. Secondly, women themselves became aware of their capacity for work, suffering and leadership and started organizing themselves to fight for their due place both at home and in society. Thirdly, the nationalist movement further provided a suitable forum for women to assess their own work which began in the earlier part of the century with the creation of several women’s organisations. Christened as Mahila Samitis, Women’s Clubs, Ladies’ Societies etc. several women’s organisations cropped up in different parts of the country during the period 1910-1920. The more prominent among them was the All India Women’s Conference, which was founded in 1927 and was the result of the reawakening of the women particularly in the urban areas. The Swadeshi Movement, the Non-cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement drew them out from the seclusion of home and made them direct participants in the struggle.

However, since these efforts were by and large limited to the urban elite section, they could not much improve the position of the women in the country. These measures did not have much effect over the overwhelming majority of population residing in rural areas. In rural areas there existed mass illiteracy and, therefore, orthodoxy widely prevailed. Though under the influence of the socio-political leaders, to some extent, and largely with the motive of procuring

33. Ibid.
manpower for the clerical cadre in the government, the British Government in India opened some schools and colleges but these were far inadequate considering the population and the length and breadth of the country.

2.2.2 Efforts in the Post-Independence Era

Thus, at the time of independence, the position of the women in the country was pathetic and it was observed that their plight could be improved by spreading education. Therefore, the Government started opening the educational institutions even in far and wide areas but due to the paucity of resources, the pace was very slow. Therefore, to supplement the spread of education as a measure towards undoing the profusely prevalent gender discrimination in the country, the Government initiated several constitutional, legislative and executive efforts.

With a view to remove the profusely prevalent gender discrimination in the country, the constitution makers made several provisions in the Constitution. The Constitution of India guarantees equal political rights including the right to vote to women. Also, almost all the provisions contained in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are there in the Indian Constitution. Not only the Constitution guarantees equal political status to women, there is even a scope for 'positive discrimination' in their favour as is evident in Article 15(3) of the Constitution. Further, Article 14 of the Indian Constitution provides equality before law and equal protection of law while Articles 23 and 42 provide for prohibition of traffic in human beings. Article 39(a) states that the State shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men

and women the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Article 39(d) enjoins the State to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. Besides, Article 51(A)(e) of the Indian Constitution lay down that it would be the duty of every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

The Indian Constitution made a deliberate radical departure from the age-old poor social status of women by granting them equal, social and political status. Constitutional equal status means that every adult female, whatever by her social position or accomplishments, has now the opportunity to function as a citizen and individual partner in the task of nation building. In view of the constitutional obligations, during the post-independence era, women have been recognized as a separate target group and the government has directed its efforts towards mainstreaming of women into the national developmental process.35

The legislative efforts include the Special Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls, 1956, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, the Comprehensive Family Court Act, 1984 etc. Equality of opportunities in employment helped to ensure a significant increase in number of women in public service. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, attempts to prevent discrimination on grounds of sex

against women in matter of employment and other connected matters. Political equality has radically changed the position and status of women.36

The prominent executive efforts taken with a view to ameliorate the sorry plight of women in India included the setting up of "Women and Child Development Departments at the Union and State levels, formation of National Commission for Women in several states, State Women Development Corporations, orienting plan strategy to include women specific and women related programmes, launching of special schemes like Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, and Indira Mahila Yojana etc.

In India, values encouraging political participation of women co-esit with the notions of traditional role of women vis-à-vis the family and society. The Five Year Plans of the executive reflected this notion in the first five Plans. The issue of women and their development was viewed primarily from the welfare point of view.37 The women development aspects were attended to in the First Five Year Plan (1951-1956) period, though the approach was through various welfare programmes related to primary health and child development. The Central Social Welfare Board was set up in 1953 as an apex body at the national level to promote voluntary sections especially at the grassroots level to take up welfare related

activities for women and children. The Second Five Year Plan hoped for development from grassroots through *Mahila Mandal* while the Third, Fourth and the three Interim Plans planned for education of women, maternal and child care services, need for vocational training for women and also on provision of working women's hostel in large cities, etc. In the Fifth Plan there was a shift from the welfare to the developmental approach and it was only in the Sixth Plan that women's upliftment and their role as agents of development received priority attention. In fact, the Sixth Five Year Plans (1980-1985) adopted a multi-disciplinary approach towards women related issues for the first time. The emphasis shifted from welfare to development with special thrust on three core sectors of health, education and employment. Special programmes such the TRYSEM, IRDP, DWCRA etc.) were introduced for the women in the rural areas.

In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-1990), the development programmes continued with the major objectives of raising women's economic and social status and bringing them into the mainstream of national development. A significant step in this direction was to identify the Beneficiary-Oriented Schemes in various developmental sectors which extended direct benefits to women. The

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40 Ibid.
thrust on generation of female employment through proper education and vocational training also continued. The Mahila Literacy scheme was launched in 1989 to translate the goals of the National Policy on Education (1998, revised in 1992) into a concrete programme for education of women, particularly those from socially and economically marginalized groups in rural areas. The Indira Awas Yojana, launched in 1985-86, stipulates that houses under this scheme are to be allotted in the name of the female member of the beneficiary household or jointly in names of husband and wife. It gives priority to widows and unmarried women.41

The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-1997) with human development as its major focus, played a very important role in development of women. The National Commission for Women, the first statutory body to deal with women issues, has been set up in 1992. It has reviewed various women related laws among other activities and documented women-related crimes and violences. The open adalats conducted by the Commission have been very effective in instrumenting social checks and balances in women related violence.42

The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), set up in 1993, is a national level mechanism to meet the credit needs of poor and asset-less women in the informal sector. Women Development Corporations have been set up in several states to

help the women entrepreneurs with support from the RMK, which also supports the women's cooperative societies and other women headed organisations. The most noteworthy achievement of the RMK is that it has maintained a recovery rate of 90 percent and above through all these years.43

Towards the socio-economic empowerment of women, the Ninth Five Year Plan made a significant change in the conceptual strategy of planning for women. In the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) specifically stipulated identifying 'Women Component Plans' for which at least 30 percent of funds should flow to women development schemes. There are women specific welfare schemes/programmes that receive funds under the annual budgetary allocations such as Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Balika Samridhi Yojana, Working Women's Hostels, Swashakti Project and other schemes – 29 identifiable women specific schemes that received Rs. 856.64 crores allocation in 2000-2001 Central Government budget as against Rs. 605.46 crores in 1999-2000 (RE).44 Further, while speaking in a conference of Commonwealth Ministers in charge of Women’s Affairs in New Delhi in April 2000, the then Union Minister for Human Resource Development Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi declared that the year 2001 would be observed as 'Year of Women Empowerment.' This was done with a view to expedite and concentrate the efforts on women empowerment. The Minister on

43 ibid.

44 ibid.
the occasion also announced that a National Policy on Empowerment of Women was being finalized.

The Parliament approved the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in 2001 which was framed by the Department of Women and Child Development. The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include:45

1. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential

2. The *de-jure* and *de-facto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil

3. Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation

4. Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.

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5. Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women

6. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.

7. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.

8. Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child, and

9. Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women’s organizations.

But lamentably the result of all these efforts has also been far from satisfactory and all these efforts remained merely ‘welfarist’ articulated and administered from above. Thus, neither the social change/development measures nor the economic development/upliftment initiatives could produce the intended change in the quality and status of life of the women. Therefore, the policy makers, the parliamentarians, the media and the civil society all together demanded a next step i.e., political empowerment of women.46

2.3 Political Empowerment of Women

The issue of political empowerment of women has not a very long history as it come to the fore only in the second half of the previous century. However, its seeds can be seen in our freedom struggle which was viewed by the national leaders in a wider perspective of restructuring the socio-economic and future
political set-up, to provide in its, among other things, equality of both men and women. Under the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919, women obtained the voting right. However, they exercised their franchise for the first time in 1932. It is worth mentioning that way back in 1920 Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins led a group of women to demand equal rights of representation for the fair sex in the Indian Provincial Legislatures. But till 1926, no woman ever got into any legislature. Muthulakshmi Reddy of Madras, a dedicated social worker was the first woman to be nominated to the Madras Legislative Council and she was also elected as the Deputy Chairperson of the Council. The initiative of introducing the Devdasi Bill was taken by her. Kamla Devi Chattopadhya, a pioneer in the women’s movement was the first to contest a seat from the South Kanar Constituency in Karnataka in 1926.

The attitude of our national leaders was evident from the Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Programme which was adopted in 1931 by the Indian National Congress. The Congress declared that it could agree to a Constitution that provided for equal rights and obligations for all citizens, without any bar on account of sex and provided for adult suffrage. Thus, although the British Government turned down the demand for women’s franchise, the Indian National Congress adopted a resolution as far back as 1931 in favour of women’s

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Later on, the Swadeshi Movement, the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement drew them out from the seclusion of home and made them direct participants in the struggle. Women also involved themselves in the making of the Constitution. The Constituent Assembly was set up in October, 1946, had amongst its members some of the noted personalities like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabhai Deshmukh, Renuka Roy and Hansa Mehta.

The Constitution, which was adopted on January 26, 1951, guaranteed to all women equal rights of participation in the political process through the provision of universal adult franchise under Articles 325 and 326. Further, the Directive Principles of State Policy under Articles 39(a), 39(c), 39(d) and 42 of the Constitution also makes special provisions for improving the status of the women. Also, after the enactment of the Constitution, the Congress implemented the resolution in favour of women's franchise and representation, which it passed in 1931. However, all this was not sufficient to motivate the women and their participation in political life was almost negligible. Thus, for instance, during the first general elections, only 66 women contested the elections to the Lok Sabha and out of them only 19 could enter the House. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, who was appalled at the low representation of the women, wrote a letter to the Chief

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50 Kaushik, S.I. and Kiran Hooda, "Women Empowerment at Grassroots Level" in Singl. Shiv Raj et. al. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 312
Ministers with an aim to increase the participation of the women in the electoral process and to increase their share in the legislatures and political life. He wrote:51

I have been meeting our new Members of Parliament. There are over 700 of them as between the two Houses. I have noticed with great regret how few women have been elected. I suppose this is so in the State Assemblies and Councils also. I think we are very much to be blamed. It is not a matter of showing favour to any one or even of injustice, but rather of doing something, which is not conducive to the future growth of our country. I am quite sure that our real and basic growth will only come when women have a full chance to play their part in public life. Wherever they have had this chance, they have, as a whole, done well, better if I may say so, than the average man. Our laws are man made, our society dominated by man, and so most of us naturally take a very lopsided view of the matter. We cannot be objective, because we have grown up in certain grooves of thought and action. But the future of India will probably depend ultimately more upon the women than the men.

But there was no appreciable improvement in the situation and the representation of the women continued to be abysmally low. Even in the Fourteenth General Elections to the Lok Sabha, 2004, there were only 355 women candidates out of a total of 5435 and only 45 women have been elected to (Fourteenth) Lok Sabha. In fact, the percentage of woman Members of Parliament has never touched the double-digit mark in the Lok Sabha. The position of state legislatures is no

different from it. This situation prompted a serious debate regarding the measures to politically empower the women and the churning process resulted into prompting legislative action towards reserving the seats for the women in legislatures.

On the International Women's Day (8 March) in 1996, the House unanimously adopted a Resolution which emphasized the need for providing adequate reservation of seats for women in the state Legislatures and the Parliament. This was followed by the introduction of the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill in Lok Sabha by the H.D. Deva Gowda led United Front Government at the Centre, in September 1996. The Bill provided that "not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election" in the House of People in a state or union territory and in the legislative assembly in every state shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in that state. However, the Bill faced opposition from several quarters on two major issues (special quota for OBC women from the 33 percent and some percentage of reservation in the Rajya Sabha) and, therefore, it had to be referred to a Joint Select Committee, which was headed by Geeta Mukherjee, consisting of 31 members from both the Houses of Parliament. The Committee *inter alia* made the following recommendations in their report submitted on December 9, 1996:

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1. The words 'not less than one-third' occurring in the Bill are vague and liable to be interpreted differently and confer power to make reservation which may far exceed the limit of one-third. The Committee is, therefore, of the opinion that these words should be substituted by 'as nearly as may be one-third'.

2. The Bill should be amended so as to provide that one of the members nominated from the Anglo-Indian community shall be a woman by rotation;

3. There should also be reservation of seats for women in Rajya Sabha and the legislative councils. The Committee, therefore, recommended that the government should work out the modalities for this purpose and bring out suitable legislation in this regard at the appropriate time; and

4. The Bill, as amended, be passed without any delay.

However, even thereafter a consensus could not emerge and there was stiff opposition from several political parties, including those of United Front constituents, the Bill fell through on December 14, 1996. In the meanwhile, to achieve the objective of politically empower the women and to monitor the progress and also to suggest ways and means to implement the policies and projects meant for improving the status of women, a Standing Committee on Empowerment of Women was constituted. Addressing the inaugural meeting of the Committee on May 6, 1997, the Deputy Chairman of the Upper House, Najma Heptulla55 said:

55 Arora, Subhash C., "Women Empowerment in India" in op. cit., p. 127.
In order to secure for women equality, status and dignity in all fields there is an urgent and continuing need for changing societal attitudes and elimination of all forms of gender based discrimination in the minds of men and women in the society. Unless women acquire equal status and dignity in all spheres, the development and advancement of any society or country cannot be considered complete. No society can progress without women's equality, status and development. To achieve the broader objective of equality, there is a need for translation of *de jure* equality of women into *de facto* equality, participation of women in all spheres of life, sharing of responsibilities between women and men, affirmative action wherever necessary.

The concern regarding lack of proper representation of the women in the legislative bodies was once again expressed in the Parliament on the eve of International Women's Day in 199 (March 8) when a Resolution was proposed which was adopted unanimously by the House. While referring to similar Resolutions adopted earlier it was suggested that attention may be focused on the following issues.⁵⁶

(i) Adequate reservation for women in both the Houses of Parliament be made so as to give representation to all sections of the society.

(ii) Given the vital role that parliamentarians can play in the process of social change and the critical importance attached to accountability to legislature in Platform for Action, it is important to build their capacities, strengthen their networks and equip them with resources.

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(iii) Women’s voices should be promoted in decision-making process including the macro planning processes.

(iv) The fulfillment of the Ninth Plan objective of Empowerment of Women and the strategy of sectoral women’s component plans needs to closely monitored and women’s voices and perspective should be a part of this monitoring.

(v) There should be an ongoing process of gender mainstreaming including the strengthening of the government machinery and the National Commission for Women.

(vi) Gender sensitization of enforcement mechanisms, judiciary and central and state ministries are to be a priority and need to be matched with resources.

(vii) The reform of laws to address issues of gender-based violence should be closely monitored.

(viii) Additional resources both financial and technical need to be committed to combat increasing gender-based violence, to provide legal literacy and to correct media portrayal of women.

(ix) The engendering of census and data gathering systems should be a priority.

(x) There is need for enhanced UN system support for efforts at securing gender equality and development.

The Bill seeking 33 percent reservation for women in legislative bodies was again presented in the Thirteenth Lok Sabha by the then National Democratic

56 Cited in Ibid, p. 47.
Government on December 23, 1999 as the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill. However, due to the determined action of the Opposition, the consideration of the Bill was stalled. Members belonging to the S.P., the R.J.P. and the B.S.P. demanded the withdrawal of the Bill and pressed for the introduction of sub-quota within the proposed legislation for the backward classes, scheduled castes/tribes and minorities. As against this, another section of the Opposition consisting of the Congress and the Left parties insisted that the Bill be taken up in its present form. The government too rejected the demand for sub-quota and made it clear that the legislation would be taken up in its present form. This led to a logjam on the Bill and in the absence of a consensus, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the House (the Thirteenth Lok Sabha). Now, fresh efforts towards enactment of a legislation providing for reservation of one-third seats in the state legislatures and the Parliament for women are being made by the present UPA government.

The legislative initiatives seeking 33 percent reservation of seats in the state legislatures and the Parliament were undertaken in the background that the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (which inter alia provided for at least one-third seats for the women in the rural and urban local bodies respectively) passed by the Parliament in 1992 and assented to by the President in 1993 have been working successfully. The effort towards providing one-third reservation of seats for women in the rural and urban local bodies was first made by the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress Government in July 1989 with the introduction of 64th and 65th Constitutional Amendment Bills respectively. Though the Bills

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steered clear through the Lower House, they fell in the Upper House due to the lack of Congress majority in that House.

The two Bills were again introduced in the Parliament when the Congress was again voted to power in 1991. The Bills were passed by the Parliament on December 22, 1992 as 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (the earlier pertains to the rural local bodies while the latter to the urban local bodies) and sent for presidential assent. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed on April 21, 1993 and came into effect on April 24, 1993 with its Gazette notification. The Act made two provisions of far reaching consequences; one, it provided constitutional status to the rural local bodies and two, it provided for reservation of at least one-third seats for the women in all the institutions of rural local government including for their chairpersons. Similar provisions were made by the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in the case of urban local bodies. Accordingly, the two Acts have been widely hailed as revolutionary both in the field of local government and political empowerment of women. The main provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act include:

1. The Act for the first time provided constitutional status to the rural local bodies by recognizing them as the third tier of government.

2. The Act provided for a three-tier structural arrangement viz. Zila Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Gram Panchayat at the village level.

3. The Act for the first time provided statutory recognition to the Gram Sabha. It has been done to ensure peoples’ participation in the preparation
and implementation of the development plans. All eligible registered voters are members of gram Sabha.

4. It provided for reservation of one-third seats for the women in all the institutions of Panchayati Raj. This reservation for women is also applicable among the women of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Besides, reservation for women has also been provided among the chairpersons of all these institutions.

5. The Act also provided for the reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population.

6. The Panchayati Raj Institutions have been assigned the powers, authority and responsibilities with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice including the power of taking decisions on 29 subjects contained in the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution, which has been appended to the Constitution by the Act.

7. To replace the hither-to-fore adopted 'top-down' model of planning in the country, a statutory planning body viz. District Planning Committee has to be created at the district level.

8. To maintain periodicity in conducting elections to the local bodies, State Election Commission has to be created by which it is declared that elections will be conducted to local bodies regularly in every five years and even if the local bodies are dissolved or dismissed, elections would be conducted within six months of their dissolution/dismissal.
9. To make the local bodies financially sound, the Act visualized a Panchayat Finance Commission to be constituted by the Governor of the respective state after every five years to make recommendations regarding devolution of funds from the state exchequer to the rural local bodies.

10. The provisions of the Act are applicable in all parts of the country thereby providing a uniform structure of the rural local government throughout the country.

The 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act directed all the state legislatures to amend their respective (rural local government) legislations to conform to the Constitutional Amendment within one year from the date of passing of the Act. In accordance with this provision, the Haryana Legislative Assembly passed the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 on April 21, 1994.

In addition to the other provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act also provided for one-third reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions falling under the purview of the state. Under the new provisions, so far three general elections to the local bodies have been held (in December 1994, March 2000 and April 2005) in Haryana, as also in several of the other states. The elections have also been held in the Mewat region of Haryana, which comprises of six blocks viz. Hathin, Nuh, Nagina, Ferozpur Jhirka, Punhana, and Taoru.